

Rules of the Game

Polymorphing Revisited (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Rules of the Game explored **polymorphing** in detail back in the [spring of 2004](#). The recent announcement regarding the *polymorphspell* and the spate of errata documents it has spawned, however, has changed the polymorph landscape somewhat, and that merits a new look at polymorphing here.

The *polymorph* spell itself hasn't changed at all; see [the announcement](#) for details. What has changed is the *polymorph* spell's role as the basis for most forms of shapeshifting in the game. Most effects and class features that once referenced the *polymorph* spell now refer to the **alternate form special quality** instead. Unfortunately, the alternate form description refers the reader back to the *polymorph* spell, and that text contains references to the *alter self* spell. All of this cross-referencing sows confusion when characters begin switching forms during adventures.

This series examines alternate form and how it works in the game. The material presented here draws heavily on the original *Rules of the Game* series [on polymorphing](#). Refer to the original series for a glossary of terms used in this series.

The Basics of Alternate Form

You'll find rules for the alternate form special quality on page 305 in the *Monster Manual*. Here's an overview, along with some reminders and commentary:

- **Supernatural ability.**

Alternate form is magical and will not function within an *antimagic field* or anywhere else where magic is negated or suppressed.

Taking an alternate form is a **standard action** that does not provoke an **attack of opportunity**.

A creature using the alternate form power has a moderate aura of **transmutation** magic (because there's magic in the transformation into the assumed form), but alternate form is not subject to *dispel magic* because supernatural abilities can't be dispelled -- see page 289 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* -- nor are they subject to counterspells.

Alternate form works only on the creature using the power. It cannot be used on another creature, even through the share spells ability.

- **Limited forms.**

A creature with the alternate form special quality can assume one or more specific alternate forms, which are specified in the creature's description. The creature cannot use alternate forms that are not specified in the description.

- No healing.

Unlike the *polymorph* spell, a creature using alternate form doesn't regain any **hit points** when assuming a new form.

- Gains and losses.

Upon assuming a new form, the creature loses some of its own characteristics and gains certain characteristics of the assumed form instead. The creature also retains some of its own characteristics. The section that follows examines what changes and what stays the same. This examination concludes in Part Two.

Assuming an Alternate Form

An alternate form is mostly physical. A creature in an alternate form retains its essential self, but changes its outward appearance and physical attributes.

- Upon changing form, the creature gains the assumed form's **size**.

The size gained is always the size for a typical example of the assumed form's kind. A creature's typical size is listed at the top of its statistics block in the creature's description. Most creatures allow for some size variations, but those are for exceptional specimens. For example, a typical dire bear is size **Large**. Some dire bears are **Huge** (see the advancement section in the dire bear creature description), but if a creature assumes dire bear form through the alternate form class feature, it becomes Large.

It is possible for a creature description to specify a different size than the typical size for an assumed form, but an assumed form is limited to the typical size if a different size isn't specified.

A few creatures have a range of typical sizes. Examples include sharks, monstrous spiders, and tojanidas. In such cases the creature description specifies which sizes the assumed form can have. If not, alternate form allows the creature to assume any typical size. For example, a bronze dragon could assume the form of a **Tiny**, **Small**, or **Medium** viper because those are all typical sizes for vipers (see page 280 in the *Monster Manual*) and all fall within the range of sizes the dragon's alternate form power allows. Beware of additional blocks of statistics in a creature description that show the creature with a few **levels** added (such as the mummy lord), or creature descriptions that show alternative forms (such as lycanthropes). You can't use alternate form to assume a form with **class levels** or to assume another creature's alternative forms when shape shifting.

- A creature retains its own type and subtypes when assuming a new form.

The creature's body might look and feel a little different, but it's still the same creature. Any vulnerabilities or immunities the creature has by virtue of its original type and subtype remain in the assumed form. For example a gold dragon retains its immunity to magic *sleep* and paralyzation effects (from its dragon type) even when it assumes an **animal** or **humanoid** form. It also retains its immunity to fire and vulnerability to cold (from its **fire subtype**) when in an assumed form.

A creature does not gain the assumed form's type or subtypes, and it does not gain any vulnerabilities or immunities from the assumed form's type and subtypes (with one exception noted in the sidebar and addressed later).

Special attacks or effects that depend on the recipient's type or subtypes affect a creature in an assumed form the same way they would affect the creature when it is in its natural form. For example, a **ranger** whose favored enemy is dragons meets a gold dragon that has assumed the form of a cat (a creature of the animal type). The ranger still benefits from the skill and combat **bonuses** her favored enemy class feature provides when she interacts with the masquerading dragon. Likewise, a ranger whose favored enemy is animals would not gain any benefits against the dragon, even when the dragon wears a cat's form.

- A creature in an alternate form gains the **natural weapons**, **natural armor**, **movement modes**, and **extraordinary** special attacks of its new form.

The creature loses natural weapons, natural armor, movement modes, and any extraordinary special attacks of its original form not derived from class levels from its natural form in favor of what the new form provides (but see Part Three). All the things listed here are derived wholly (or mostly) from the creature's outward physical form -- claws, teeth, limbs, skin, and the like. These things change when the creature's body changes. For example, an adult bronze dragon has six natural weapons (bite, two claws, two wings, and a tail), all of which it can use with the full attack action. If the dragon assumes a crocodile's form, it has only two natural weapons (bite and tail) and can use one at a time, even in a full attack (see the crocodile creature description). The example dragon also gives up its crush extraordinary attack and gains the crocodile's **improved grab** instead. The dragon's +20 natural armor bonus becomes +4 (the crocodile's natural armor bonus). The dragon loses its flying speed (along with its wings) and its land and swim speeds as well. Instead it uses the crocodile's land speed of 20 feet and the crocodile's swim speed of 30 feet. See Part Two for more notes on speeds.

From page 305 of the *Monster Manual* (adjusted for the errata changes):

Alternate Form (Su): A creature with this special quality has the ability to assume one or more specific alternate forms. **A true seeing spell or ability reveals the creature's natural form. A creature using alternate form reverts to its natural form when killed, but separated body parts retain their shape. A creature cannot use alternate form to take the form of a creature with a template.** Assuming an alternate form results in the following changes to the creature:

- The creature retains the type and subtype of its original form. It gains the size of its new form. **If the new form has the aquatic subtype, the creature gains that subtype as well.**
- **The creature loses the natural weapons, natural armor, and movement modes of its original form, as well as any extraordinary special attacks of its original form not derived from class levels (such as the barbarian's rage class feature).**
- The creature gains the natural weapons, natural armor, movement modes, and extraordinary special attacks of its new form.
- The creature retains the special qualities of its original form. It does not gain any special qualities of its new form.
- The creature retains the spell-like abilities and supernatural attacks of its old form (except for breath weapons and gaze attacks). It does not gain the spell-like abilities or supernatural attacks of its new form.

-- The creature gains the physical ability scores (Str, Dex, Con) of its new form. It retains the mental ability scores (Int, Wis, Cha) of its original form. **Apply any changed physical ability score modifiers in all appropriate areas with one exception: the creature retains the hit points of its original form despite any change to its Constitution.**

-- **Except as described elsewhere, the creature retains all other game statistics of its original form, including (but not necessarily limited to) HD, hit points, skill ranks, feats, base attack bonus, and base save bonuses.**

-- The creature retains any spellcasting ability it had in its original form, although it must be able to speak intelligibly to cast spells with verbal components and it must have humanlike hands to cast spells with somatic components.

-- The creature is effectively camouflaged as a creature of its new form, and it gains a +10 bonus on Disguise checks if it uses this ability to create a disguise.

What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week, we'll complete our look at the basics of alternate form.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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